

Positivised English Jazz-Age Qualifiers, their Developments and Penetration into Some European Vocabularies

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Abstract

The paper is based on our research into the existence and semantic-communicative roles of the English positive qualifiers that arose from negative or non-positive lexical units in the environment of American jazz music in the early 20th century. After identifying them and analyzing their presence and functioning in the Jazz Age, our research also follows their further development and their presence in the lexis of contemporary English, and subsequently investigates their penetration into other languages, too, focusing on several European languages, including also Slovak.

1. Introduction

Qualifiers (as to Slovak dealt with e. g. by Branická 1987) are among rather dynamic lexical items sensitive to the general communicative atmosphere of a certain period (mostly in colloquial style), participating in expressing its socio-cultural attitudes. Hence, some qualifiers rise, and some also fall, with the particular period, and are then replaced by other lexical items, or undergo semantic-communicative changes excluding them from this lexical subsystem. However, others not only withstand the test of time and exceed the boundaries of a particular period, but also preserve their trendiness. They can become incorporated into general vocabulary, or, in the case of English, even become items that are "exported" due to the fact that as borrowings they find their way into other languages, too, thus spreading internationally.

Within a more general research, when studying the etymology of positive qualifiers (Böhmerová 2009, in print), we found that in this semantic function some of them arose as linguistic offspring of the Jazz Age. In our present research we would like to focus our attention on a specific subset of these lexical items, i.e. the positivised qualifiers – the lexical units which originally were either negative or semantically unrelated to polarity. In addition to their being interesting from the linguistic point of view itself, their analysis can in this special context perhaps support the generally acknowledged interconnection of language and culture in an international context, with focus on the particular transatlantic social, cultural and linguistic relatedness.

Combining diachronical and synchronical approach in investigating this lexical subsystem, the aim of our research was to identify the target English lexical items, to follow their semantic and socio-linguistic development, and to check their penetration into some European languages.

2. Jazz age and its cultural and socio-linguistic atmosphere

Jazz Age owes its name to a new style of music art which originated in the United States "through the confrontation of blacks with European music" (cf. Berendt), and it describes the period from 1918 to 1929, some sources extending it even into the early thirties. It was one of the cultural features characterizing the Roaring Twenties, though its roots are deeper and go back to 19th and early 20th century American popular music, above all as performed by African American musicians in the South. Its cradle was in New Orleans Dixieland, and later it spread to other parts of the United States, gaining admirers, fame and followers on the

Mississippi steamboats, in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago clubs, then reaching the East Coast, before becoming highly popular also in Europe. American jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and a number of others gained world-wide popularity.

Musically, early jazz was based on improvisation, individual creativity and vigour, interaction of musicians, collaboration within artistic freedom, personal mood and experience, with individual musicians taking turns in playing the melody and improvising syncopated countermelodies. It was first played in red-light districts, at funerals and at marches and dances, but later spread to the most prestigious concert halls. While loved and enjoyed by many, in the early times of its existence members of the older generation saw jazz as threatening the old values in culture and promoting new decadent values.

Etymologically, the word *jazz* is believed to have appeared in San Francisco in 1913, introduced by William Slattery in connection with sports, namely baseball, in the sense of "energy and vigour" of players, though also several other – some rather audacious – interpretations of its possible origin and motivation exist.

It was the spontaneity and vitality of musical production of African American players which became characteristic of the Jazz Age that was marked also by modernist trends in social behaviour (e.g. beginnings of acceptance of minorities, but also the use of drugs), as well as by new trends in arts (e.g. the rise of Art Deco). In literature, largely credited with coining the term is F. Scott Fitzgerald, who also incorporated it in the title of his short story collection *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922; cf. Böhmerová 1996).

3. Emergence of English positivised jazz-age qualifiers

Within the informal atmosphere of the Jazz Age, in the southern Black American slang several positive qualifiers arose. They all resulted from shift of meaning, hence appeared as neosemanticisms, and communicatively undoubtedly came about namely thanks to the fact that in slang spontaneity, informality, non-conventionality and understatement are generally preferred, which was in line not only with the musical but also the linguistic attitudes of the protagonists of and adherents to the Jazz Age. Some of those lexical units were originally unrelated to evaluative polarity, and it is mainly understatement which allowed for their being joined also by formerly semantically negative lexical units which in this period started to be used for positive evaluation.

Semantically this is a specific and dynamic lexical area, and neither any database labelling such English items nor any list of them has been found in any sources. Hence in collecting the data we started by checking the *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (Ayto, 1992), which includes more than 5000 entries of slang words (its coverage ranges from the very earliest slang still in use (*gob* from 1550) to late 20th century). The dictionary is based on data from *The Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Among the entries the rise of which was presented as related to jazz we searched for what we define as positivised qualifiers. The data thus collected were then checked with those in *Brewer's Dictionary of Twentieth Century Phrase and Fable* (1991), and, last but not least, *Ayto's Movers and Shakers – A chronology of words that shaped our age* (2006) where among the selected representatives of a century of new words we scanned all the entries given as neologisms for the particular early decades of the 20th century. We also consulted several other dictionaries (see *Lexicographical Sources* below). For cross-linguistic purposes we used *A Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (Görlach 2005).

4. Data

The following list in chronological sequence presents the positivised Jazz-Age qualifiers found, and with the years given in different sources as the time since when their occurrence is documented.

Chronology of Some Positived Jazz-Age Qualifiers

	ODMSlg		M&Sh BreD20CPF	
<i>bad</i>	N Am	1928	1920s	1950s
<i>solid</i>	US	1935	---	1930s
<i>groovy</i>	US	1944	1937	1970s
<i>in there</i>	US	1944	---	---
<i>cool</i>	US	1947	1933	1930s
<i>crazy</i>	US	1953	---	---

As evident from the table, only six positivised Jazz-Age qualifiers have been found. However, their number should not be expected to be high, because their rise in the lexis is related to one generation only (of speakers of colloquial American English), and at their time they coexisted with numerous other positive qualifiers, i. e. older and neutral ones like *nice*, *excellent*, *wonderful*, etc., or though then relatively new but not jazz-related slang ones like *out-of-sight* (1896), *doggy* (1889), *whizzo* (1905), *wicked* (1920), *pip* (1928; mainly US), *dreamy* (1941), *plenty* (1933), *ready* (1938; US), the latter two used with regard to music, but not in any particular connection with jazz.

In the following part we present the etymological and semantic data about the positivised Jazz-Age qualifiers which we have found within our research. The qualifier itself is followed by reference to the source dictionary (the list of abbreviations is presented after the data), mostly also the year of its first documented occurrence(s), then the socio-historical circumstances of its rise, its original meaning, as well as some other relevant cultural and linguistic information as stated in the particular sources.

- *bad*
 - a. ODMSlg: 1928, orig. and mainly US, esp. jazz and Black English – *extremely good*;
 - b. of a musical performance or player: *going to the limits of free improvisation*;
 - c. of a lover: *extravagantly loving*;
 - d. but M&Sh: *bad* first recorded as an approval adjective in the 1890s in African- American English; it proliferated in 1920s jazz slang: "*Ellington's jazzique is just too bad.*" 1927, Charters & Kunstadt, widened into general use in the 1970s, and was picked up by the youth culture of the 1980s;
 - e. BreD20CPF: orig. black US slang. Probably deriving its ironic use by jazz musicians in the 1950s, it became much more used by the young in the UK, as well as America, in the 1970s and 1980s through the popularity of Black music in general and Michael Jackson's album *Bad* in particular... and is distinguished by pronunciation ... "b-a-a-d". The superlative form is *baddest*.
- *solid*
 - a. ODMSlg: 1935 US jazz *excellent*, *great*;
 - b. BreD20CPF: slang for *trustworthy* or *true*; it is used to describe anything

impressive, especially jazz or rock music. It was first heard in the 1930s and revived in the hippie era of the 1960s. As noun it is slang for *hashish*, sold in solid blocks.

- *groovy*
 - a. ODMSlg: orig. US
 1. 1937 *playing or capable of playing, jazz or similar music with fluent inspiration*;
 2. 1944 *fashionable and exciting; enjoyable, excellent*; from *groove*+y
 - b. M&Sh 1937: *in the groove*; hence used as a term of general commendation: *wonderful, excellent*. Originally US jazz slang, it reached its watermark in the 1950s and 1960s, and subsequent usage has been mainly in ironic quotation marks.
 - c. BreD20CPF: *to be in the right mood, to be doing sth successfully, to be up to the current style or "with it"*; it derives from the accurate reproduction of music by a needle set in the groove of a gramophone record or disc. Widely heard in the 1960s and 1970s, but later used only sardonically.
 - d. CALD *old-fashioned slang: very fashionable and interesting: That's a groovy hat that you're wearing, did you knit it yourself?*
- *in there*
 - a. ODMSlg: 1944 US *excellent, superb*, esp. of a jazz musician's performance;
- *cool*
 - a. ODMSlg: 1947 US jazz and bebop: *restrained, relaxed, unemotional*; hence *excellent, marvellous; fashionable*;
 - b. M&Sh 1933 – a term of approval. Emerged recognizably with the meaning "*excellent, wonderful*" in African-American English in the interwar years. It reached a wider audience via jazz musicians after WWII and had the connotation of "laid-backness (probably a jazz contribution), fashionableness, stylishness". It was a core item of youth slang in the 1940s and 1950s. The next generation found it laughably passé, but it made a comeback towards the end of the 20th century.
- *crazy*
 - a. ODMSlg: 1953 orig. US jazz *excellent, superb* esp. of a jazz musician's performance

List of Abbreviations of Titles of Lexicographical Sources

(complete bibliographical data are given in *Lexicographical Sources*):

BreD20CPF *Brewer's Dictionary of Twentieth Century Phrase and Fable* (1992)

CALD *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2008)

M&Sh *Movers and Shakers* (2006)

ODMSlg *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (1992)

5. Data analysis

As evident from the data, categorially these words included adjectives (*bad, solid, groovy, cool, crazy*) and an adverbial phrase composed of a preposition and a deictic pronoun (*in there*). Semantically two of the words (*bad, crazy*) had and also at present parallelly have negative content, the others were originally unrelated to polarity evaluation.

The semantic shift of negative qualifiers into positive ones can be believed to occur as a result of the aim at understatement, the extreme degree of which is formed by the lexical unit which originally had opposite polarity, thus serving to express the highest degree of understatement. After the stage of ad-hoc formation or nonce word the lexical unit becomes systemically susceptible of use as positive qualifier (from among other not Jazz-Age related qualifiers cf. e.g. also *terribly good*, etc.). Of course, such words manifest enantiosemey, i.e.

systemic coexistence of both positive and negative polarity (Böhmerová 1997), and only their communicative usage (context, in speech also stress, etc.) can reveal their intended polarity.

As to the date of the rise of the particular meaning of the Jazz-Age positivised qualifiers, the data, interestingly enough, often differed. E.g. for *bad* ODMs1g gives the year 1928, M&S the 1920s, and BreD20CPF the 1950s, hence the inclusion of the particular lexical items could only be made on the basis of studying and comparing several lexicographical sources. The presented date of the first appearance of *in there* and *crazy* does not fall in the Jazz-Age itself, but they have still been included here as in the sources their usage is clearly referred to the early jazz musicians. Let us add that in the above presented data only the meanings concerning the targeted lexical sphere are listed with the particular words..

Of course, what is interesting is also the fate of these words after the Jazz Age and outside it. When checking the above list, the qualifier *bad*, as stated in the data, in the 1970s widened into general use, and was picked up by the youth culture of the 1980s – it is noteworthy that its superlative has the morphologically slang form *baddest*. As to *solid*, its use as positive qualifier was revived in the 1960 during the hippie era. With some entries the sources give the time when in this particular meaning they got out of use, e.g. after the 1970s *groovy* was positively used only ironically. In this respect detailed analysis of the data is hampered by the fact that with the other items the sources do not state whether the lexical unit is still in use in the meaning of positive qualifier. The only exception is *cool* which in CALD (2008) is listed also with the current informal meaning, though partly narrowed down to *fashionable* or *attractive*. It should be noted that as a positivised qualifier *cool* underwent rather dynamic development, appearing relatively late in the Jazz Age, but soon, i.e. in the 1940s and 1950s, became the core item of youth slang, then ridiculously old-fashioned, and since the end of the 20th century again very trendy.

The above testifies to a relatively high dynamism in the lexical area of positive qualifiers. Arising as trendy colloquial or slang words within one generation and within a specific cultural context, some of them in that meaning remain part of the lexical history of the period, while others continue in their existence, usually – as it seems to be indicated by the data – by their being "re-born" when they are later "rediscovered" by a new generation in a socio-cultural atmosphere which in attitude is found to be similar to the one of freedom, vigour and informality of the Jazz Age. After all, jazz has never lost its attractiveness, and from its cradle in the US has found its way to Europe, too, together with its terminology and vocabulary, including also some of the positivised qualifiers to which it gave rise.

6. Cross-linguistic considerations – positivised jazz-age qualifiers in some European languages

The attractiveness of jazz had its impact on the vocabulary of other languages as well, and gave rise to a number of borrowings. We have focused on finding out whether the investigated positivised qualifiers as borrowings occur in European languages. Our source of research was *A Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (2005) which includes English borrowings into 16 European languages (Slovak, unfortunately, not being in their number).

The presence or absence of the positivised Jazz-Age qualifiers in some European languages can be shown in the following section (only the relevant meanings and only the languages into which they have been borrowed with these meanings are listed):

- *bad* ---
- *solid* ---

- *groovy* *fashionable and exciting; enjoyable, excellent:*
 Ge 1970s ^(1 slg, obs?)
 Du 1990s ^(1 y)
 Nw 1970s ^(1 slg)
 Ic 1970s ^(1 slg)
 Fr end 20th c. ^(1 jour, y, sg)
- *in there* ---
- *cool* *excellent, marvellous:*
 Ge 1970s ^(1 slg)
 Du 1990s ^(1 y)
 Nw mid 20th c. ^{(1 slg)*} (possibly influenced by Sw *kul "fun"*)
 Ic 1970s ^(1 slg)
 Fr mid 20th c. ^(1 y)
 Sp 1980s ^(1 mod)
 Bg end 20th c. ^(1 slg, y)
 Gr end 20th c. ^(1 slg, y)
- *crazy* *excellent:*
 Ic 1960s ^(1 slg)

Abbreviations:

Ge	German
Du	Dutch
Nw	Norwegian
Ic	Icelandic
Fr	French
Sp	Spanish
Bg	Bulgarian
Gr	Greek

⁽⁰⁾ used only by bilinguals

⁽¹⁾ restricted usage

⁽²⁾ fully accepted and found in many styles and registers, but is still marked as foreign in its spelling, pronunciation or morphology

⁽³⁾ the word is no longer recognized as English

⁽⁴⁾ the word is a semantic loan only

⁽⁵⁾ the word, as far as the individual language is concerned, comes from a source other than English

mod modish

slg slang

y usage by youth

The data indicate that although in English the particular meanings arose with the Jazz Age, i.e. in the first decades of the previous century, the earliest borrowing (*crazy* into Ic) dates back to the 1960s, while into most of the receiving languages the particular qualifiers started to be borrowed only since the 1970s. The reason can be seen in the fact that while jazz became quite known and popular in Europe already before WWII, English started to be the source of extensive borrowing much later, only in the second half of the 20th century when gradually it also gained the status of international *lingua franca*.

However, from the given lexical group only *cool* (8) and *groovy* (5) have penetrated into a number of languages, and even these in a relatively restricted usage. *Cool* seems to preserve its international fashionability and frequency in colloquial language, slang usage and in some media, typically those that deal with the show business and modern lifestyle. Its occurrence in Icelandic is supposed to be supported or influenced by Swedish *kul "fun"*. As to

the other items studied, *crazy* is stated as borrowed and used only in its basic meaning "insane, mad", and in reference to thus marked humorous or dramatic pieces.

Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that the research of the presence of these positivised qualifiers in European languages was based on lexicographical data, and not directly on investigating the usage in the particular spoken languages, i.e. contemporary colloquial (above all dialogical) texts, or the presence of these borrowings in the media, hence their actual occurrence, frequency and systemic status can differ. Moreover, since the time of their inclusion into the *Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (2005) there may have occurred changes in their usage, and on the basis of supposing an analogous situation to that in Slovak, some of these borrowings can be expected to have already become more widespread and frequent in other European languages, too.

As to Slovak – although many other English words have penetrated into it (the influence of English including even the word-formative processes (cf. Böhmerová 2009)) – from among positivised Jazz-Age qualifiers only *cool* has been borrowed. It is used above all by speakers of English, by youth, in colloquial language and slang, and in the media dealing with show business, culture and lifestyle, hence its status is similar to that in other European languages. Undoubtedly, it is very trendy and frequent. *Slovenský národný korpus* (2007) includes 614 concordances with *cool*, 11 with its graphically assimilated *kúl*, and 30 with the lexico-grammatically assimilated form *coolový*. However, Slovak dictionaries so far do not include it due to the fact that it is considered substandard. It has been found in VSCS (2003) and in SCS (2005), but only within the expression *cool jazz*, hence only as a term for a jazz style, not as an autonomous lexical item.

Interesting is the case of *solid* which had already earlier existed in Slovak in the form *solídny*. It was borrowed from Latin and its existence was supported by its being also an internationalism. For Slovak its following meanings are given:

- in SCS (1997) as 1. spoľahlivý, poriadny, poctivý (*reliable, due, honest*), 2. poctivo, poriadne, dôkladne urobený (*honestly, duly, thoroughly done*);
- in KSSJ (1997) as 1. seriózný, slušný (*serious, decent*), 2. ktorý je na dobrej úrovni, spoľahlivý (*who/what is on a good level, reliable*);
- in VSCS (Šaling, 2003) as 1. slušný (*serious, decent*), 2. spoľahlivý, dôkladný, poriadny (*reliable, thorough, due*).

List of Abbreviations of Titles of Lexicographical Sources

(complete bibliographical data are given in *Lexicographical Sources*):

KSCS *Krátky slovník cudzích slov* (1997)

SCS *Slovník cudzích slov* (1997)

SCS *Slovník cudzích slov* (2005)

VSCS *Velký slovník cudzích slov* (2003)

In the above case of the English lexical item *solid* and Slovak *solídny*, the formal lexical parallelism is misleading as to their basic meanings in the two languages. The meanings of Slovak *solídny* do not correspond to English *hard, firm; without admixtures*. In these meanings they are *faux amis*. Nevertheless, *solid* as an English positivised qualifier is parallel to (though not identical with) Slovak *solídny*, English *solid* expressing a higher degree of positive evaluation. However, when something is "thoroughly done", then it deserves positive evaluation, and if using for this purpose the Slovak word *solídny*, it can potentially serve as a positive understatement (in comparison with the possible more appreciative statements like *vynikajúci, skvelý, výborný (extraordinary, swell, excellent)*, etc.). Hence, though not borrowed from English (as to its form and/or meaning), in the function of a positive qualifier *solídny* is semantically parallel to its English positivised Jazz-Age qualifier

solid (based on the shift of meaning of the Latin source, above all of its meanings 1. *hard, firm, strong*, 2. *real, true* which potentially are inherently positive).

With regard to the occurrence of the investigated set of positivised qualifiers in Slovak we can conclude that the fact that only *cool* has been borrowed from English can be ascribed to its highest frequency in the media, above all advertizing and show business, where often for commercial or other reasons (atmosphere of lifestyle, etc.) English words from the original texts are preserved in translation, which paves their way for being borrowed into colloquial language.

7. Final note

Language and culture are closely interlinked, which applies not only within each linguistic community, but in the case of the recent and present status of English also cross linguistically. Our research can perhaps throw some light on the connectedness of the art of early American jazz musicians with the rise and dynamic developments of several rather symptomatic lexical phenomena, as well as on their penetration into European culture and their presence in a number of European languages.

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